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ABSTRACT

Six empirical studies have revealed undesirable effects of the use of the generic term "man" and its alternative forms to indicate both males and females. The studies have dealt with the effects of the use of generic terms and of the label "Male Interest" in job advertisements, the question of whether people perceive generic terms in sentences and in chapter titles as referring equally as frequently to women as to men, subjects' reactions to the terms "chairman" and "chairperson," and subjects' reactions to written materials that use nongenerics instead of the traditional generic constructions. The findings suggest that the use of generics biases cognitions and behaviors in ways that discriminate against women and that nongenerics are not more difficult to comprehend than are generic terms. (The paper provides examples of nonpreferred usages and preferred alternatives, points out needs for future research studies on the use of generics and nongenerics, and urges communication educators to adopt nonsexist behaviors, thereby serving as appropriate role models for their students.) (GW)

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The Generic "Man": A Review of Literature
and Implications for Communication Scholars

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Abstract

This paper argues for the increased usage of nongeneric linguistic practices as opposed to the continued use of traditional generic conventions. Several empirical studies are reviewed, demonstrating the untoward effects of generic conventions and the feasibility of adopting nongeneric alternatives. Specific suggestions are made for adopting nongeneric alternatives to the most frequently used generics "man," manlinked words (e.g., "mankind"), "he," and "his." Additional recommendations are made for further research activities that would lead to a deeper, broader understanding of the relevance of sexist and nonsexist language to human communication.

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In recent years, many articles have been written¹ emphasizing the need to reduce sexism in American society. Pursuant to this objective, many communication scholars are seriously attending to the content and form of communication instruction. For instance, Karre² lists twenty-six activities for grades K through college, intended to heighten students' and teachers' sensitivity toward sex stereotyping and their potentially deleterious effects. Sprague argues that there are essentially two functions of education: one is to transfer information; the other is to encourage students to pursue their own individual potential and constructively surmount the constraints, including socially prescribed sex roles, which frequently make it difficult for people to actualize their potential.³ Sprague further explains that there are two ways in which communication educators can reduce the impact of sexism: one is in the careful selection of textbooks, as there are many which are biased in their portrayal of sex roles through content, pictures, and writing style⁴; the other is for communication educators to "behave" in nonsexist ways, thereby, providing appropriate behavioral models for students to follow.

As prerequisites to following Sprague's advice that communication educators should model the behaviors they want their students to adopt, it is first necessary to answer two questions: (1) What are the preferred (nonsexist) behaviors?, and (2) How do we know that these are the preferred

behaviors? The purpose of the present article is to answer these questions with respect to one of the most pervasive linguistic behaviors, the use of the generic "man" and man-linked words (e.g., mankind).

While many people are aware of the philosophical and humanistic arguments vying against the use of the generic "man" and its various alternative forms, including the pronouns "he," and "his," and man-linked words⁵, relatively few people are aware of the several empirical studies done, which have actually demonstrated the untoward consequences resulting from their use. A consideration of these empirical studies is important, as their findings suggest preferred alternatives to generics (e.g., the use of "people" or "genkind" instead of "mankind"; or the use of "s/he" instead of the generic "he") while at the same time providing empirical evidence for their preferred use over the generics. A review of this literature follows.

A Review Of Empirical Studies Concerning The Generic "Man"

Sandra and Daryl Bem conducted two studies investigating the effects of the use of generics in job advertisements.⁶ In their first study, 120 high school seniors (60 men, 60 women) were divided into three groups of 40 subjects each (20 women, 20 men). Each group read a booklet of 12 job advertisements (appliance sales, telephone operator, photographer, travel agent, telephone frameman,

dental assistant, taxicab driver, telephone service representative, assistant buyer, keypunch operator, telephone lineman, and public relations advertising).

The descriptions of the telephone operator, framemen, service representative, and lineman were varied as follows. In the sex-biased (generic) condition, advertisements were written exactly as they appeared in AT&T (American Telegraph and Telephone Company) ads and brochures. The telephone framemen and linemen were described as "men" who have the opportunity to work with other "craftsmen" and enjoy the outdoors. Telephone operators and service representatives were described as "women" who place complex long distance phone calls, and "the girl to talk to" when needing special telephone services.

In the sex-unbiased condition, advertisements were written to appeal to both men and women. For example, the first sentence of the advertisement for telephone operators read, "We need calm, coolheaded men and women with clear friendly voices to do that important job of helping our customers." The third condition was sex-reversed in that job advertisements were written to appeal to the sex least frequently employed in those positions. For instance, many more men than women are employed as frameworkers, but the advertisement for frameworkers was written specifically for women and included the sentence, "The framewoman plays a vital role in telephone communications." Similarly,

the advertisement for telephone operators, a job typically held by women, was written to appeal to men and included the sentence, "We need calm coolheaded men with clear masculine voices to do that important job of helping our customers."

Analysis of the data indicated that significantly more men and women were interested in applying for "opposite-sex" jobs when the advertisements were written in sex-unbiased (non-generic) language than sex-biased (generic) language.

In their second study, Bem and Bem asked 52 female college students to rate 32 job advertisements taken from The Pittsburg Press.⁷ Sixteen of these advertisements were taken from the "Jobs-Male Interest" column; 16 were taken from the "Jobs-Female Interest" column. The subjects were divided into 2 groups of 27 subjects each. The first group read the advertisements exactly as they appeared in The Pittsburg Press, including the use of the labels "Male" and "Female" to segregate job ads (e.g., a secretary's job appeared in the female column; a reporter's job appeared in the male column). The second group of subjects read these same advertisements, but in an integrated format; i.e., the labels "Male" and "Female" were not used in this condition.

Analysis of the data indicated that in the segregated condition, "only 46% of the women were as likely to apply for 'male interest' jobs as for 'female interest' jobs."

However, in the nonsegregated condition, "86% of the women preferred 'male interest' jobs to 'female interest' jobs."

The results of the above two studies support the proposition that generic terms are not perceived as equally applicable to women as men as men and that these biased perceptions significantly affect attitudes and behavioral intentions.

Schneider and Hacker explored the question of whether people behave differently in response to generics versus nongenerics⁸. Their sample of subjects consisted of 306 college students enrolled in sociology courses at Drake University, and Grandview and Simpson Colleges. Subjects were asked to submit pictures from newspapers and magazines appropriate for illustrating chapters in an introductory sociology text. Half of the subjects received a list of nongeneric chapter titles: "Culture," "Population," "Race and Minority Groups," "Family," "Crime and Delinquency," "Violence and Social Unrest," "Ecology," and "Social Theory". The remaining subjects received a list of generic chapter titles: "Social Man," "Urban Man," "Political Man," "Industrial Man," and "Economic Man,"

Analysis of the data indicated that 64% of the subjects receiving generic chapter titles submitted pictures depicting men only. Conversely, only about 50% of the subjects receiving nongeneric titles submitted pictures depicting males only. These results support the

proposition that people do not perceive generics as referring equally to women and men, and that the use of generics may be causually related to behavior overemphasizing men's statuses in society.

Virginia Kidd also explored the question of whether people perceive generics as referring equally as frequently to women as men⁹. Sixty-eight subjects were asked to read 18 short declarative sentences (e.g., "The potentialities of man are infinitely varied and exciting."), and to describe the gender of the person(s) discussed in the sentence. The first 9 sentences were followed by open-ended questions allowing the subject to describe in his/her own words the gender of the person discussed in the sentence. The tenth through eighteenth sentences were followed by forced choice alternatives, requiring subjects to indicate whether the respondent was a woman or man.

Among the responses to the first 9 questions, 66% (407) identified male referents, 5% (31) identified female respondents, and 29% (174) identified referents which were neither exclusively male nor female. Among the responses to the tenth through eighteenth questions, approximately 86% (526) identified male referents and 9% (53) identified female referents⁹. The results of this study lend further support to the proposition that generics are not perceived as referring with equal likelihood to men and women.

Shimanoff did a study to determine whether generics are perceived as equally masculine or feminine as non-generics.¹⁰ A design was employed whereby 180 college students were divided into three groups of 60 subjects each, with each group comprised of 30 men and 30 women. One group of subjects read the sentence; "A group of students had to choose a chairman /underscript added/ to lead the group." The second group of subjects read the sentence; "A group of students had to choose a chairperson /underscript added/ to lead the group." The third group read the sentence, "A group of students had to choose an individual /underscript added/ to lead the group." Subjects were asked to describe the gender of the person being sought after to lead the group and to rate the masculinity and femininity of the stimulus words, using a previously verified rating scale consisting of twenty-six masculine/feminine adjectives.

As in previous studies, Shimanoff found that the generic "chairman" was perceived as referring to a man much more frequently than to a woman, but that this difference did not obtain when the nongenerics "individual" and "chairperson" were used. Interestingly, neither the generic nor nongenerics were perceived as particularly masculine or feminine. Other interesting findings were: 1) male subjects were more likely than female subjects to perceive the generic as referring to a man than a woman;

2) male subjects were more likely than female subjects to perceive the nongeneric "chairperson" as referring to a woman; and 3) female subjects were more likely than male subjects to perceive the nongeneric "individual" as referring to a woman than a man. This study's findings add further support to the proposition that generics are not perceived as referring with equal likelihood to men and woman. These findings also lend support for two new propositions: 1) that there may be nonsignificant differences between generics and nongenerics in their degree of perceived masculinity and femininity; and 2) there may be substantial differences between men and women in their perceptions of the gender associated with generics and nongenerics.

A study done by Soto, Forslund, and Cole sheds light on the questions of whether people have more difficulty understanding written materials using nongenerics than the traditional generic constructions, and whether people evaluate the quality of written materials using nongenerics differently than written materials using traditional generic constructions¹¹. One-hundred forty-four undergraduate students, 72 women and 72 men, were divided into six groups of 24 subjects (12 men and 12 women). The subjects read an essay by Goldenberg, discussing the education and orientation of a clinical psychologist¹². The first group of subjects read the essay in its original form,

which included the use of masculine pronouns as generics. The second group read a modified form of the essay in which female pronouns had been substituted for the male pronouns. The third and fourth groups read modified forms of the essay in which the combinations "he/she" and "she/he" were substituted for the male pronouns. The fifth group read a modified form of the essay in which the neologisms "tay" (for he or she), "ter" (for his or her), and "tem" (for him or her) were substituted for the male pronouns. The sixth group read a modified form of the essay in which the neologisms "se" (for he or she), "hes" (for his or her), and "hir" (for him or her) were substituted for the male pronouns.

After reading the essay, subjects were asked to indicate the gender of the person(s) referred to by the pronouns, to rate the quality of the composition, and to answer four true/false comprehension questions. Analysis of the data indicated that: 1) subjects perceived the use of masculine generics as referring to men more frequently than to women; 2) there were no significant differences among the essays in their perceived quality; nor 3) were there significant differences among the essays in their comprehensibility. These results support two new propositions: 1) there may be no substantial differences between generic and nongeneric constructions in their degree of perceived quality; and 2) nongeneric constructions may be equally as comprehensible as generic constructions. It is further noted, however, that this latter proposition rests on extremely tentative empirical support, as four true/false questions at best constitute a limited measure of comprehension.

The above findings are behavioral scientists' first attempts to obtain objective answers to some of the more important questions concerning the possible advantages and disadvantages of using nongeneric constructions instead of generic constructions. Specifically, the above findings suggest that the use of generics bias people's cognitions, behavioral intentions, and actual behaviors in ways that discriminate against women in favor of men, and, furthermore, that nongenerics are not perceived as less esthetically pleasing than generics, nor are they more difficult to comprehend than the more traditional generic conventions. These tentative conclusions serve as rational, empirically based reasons for using nongenerics in preference to generics whenever it is feasible to do so.

Implications And Recommendations For Communication Educators and Researchers

One of the most perplexing problems confronting communication scholars is the issue of "how" to change writing and speaking behaviors so that they conform to a less sexist, nongeneric standard. Two suggestions are made here which are easy to implement and in concert with the above research findings.

1. Use genderless "one," "person," "individual," and "people," words instead of the generics "man," and man-linked words.¹³

Nonpreferred Examples.—"The history of England is unique, not so much because Englishmen [underscript

added/ have never been slaves, nor because there was once an Empire on which the sun couldn't set, but rather because two of the three ideological systems of this century have been argued for with evidence derived from British history."¹⁴

"Eleanor Cutri Smeal, chairman /underscript added/ of the NOW (National Organization for Women) board since 1975, who was elected late yesterday as its new president, will steer the organization through what could be the most significant period of its history."¹⁵

Preferred Alternatives.—"The history of England is unique, not so much because "Englishers" have never been slaves, nor, et cetera. Eleanor Cutri Smeal, "chairperson" of the NOW board since 1975, who was elected late yesterday as its new president, et cetera.

2. Use all-inclusive "s/he" and "his/hers" constructions instead of the generics "he," and "his."¹⁶

Nonpreferred Examples.—"The politician on the campaign trail can obtain dramatically different results depending not so much on what he /underscript added/ says but on how he says it and the medium through which he elects to say it."¹⁷

"Of two persons who are given the same script of television or radio commercial, one may produce a far more effective message because of his /underscript added/ highly responsive and undomineering manner, whereas the other fails because of his bland vocal or facial expression."¹⁸

Preferred Alternatives.—The politician on the campaign trail can obtain dramatically different results depending not so much on what "s/he" says but on how "s/he" says it and the medium, et cetera. Of two persons who are given the same script of television or radio commercial, one may produce a far more effective message because of "his/her" highly responsive and undomineering manner, whereas the other fails because of "his/her" bland vocal or facial expression.

Communication researchers can do much to further our understanding of the consequences for using generics versus nongenerics and various other forms of sexist language. Specifically, future studies should attempt to determine:

- 1) whether the above findings obtain for subjects drawn from nonacademic settings; 2) whether the above findings obtain using alternative, perhaps, more rigorous measurement procedures (e.g., the measurement of comprehension by short essay responses rather than four true/false responses); 3) whether the above findings—all reached on the basis of studies done on written discourse—also obtain for oral discourse;
- 4) whether the use of nongeneric constructions affect various dimensions of source credibility and other source valence constructs; 5) whether some forms of nongeneric constructions are perceived as preferable to others; 6) the long-term impact of nongeneric usage; 5) various instructional strategies for teaching students how to speak and write using nonsexist, nongeneric constructions (e.g., the development and validation of a behavioral objectives package); and 6) quantify the frequency with which nongeneric conven-

tions are presently used in communication textbooks, journals, and convention papers.

Conclusion

While our present understanding of sexist language is still limited, it is nonetheless sufficient to allow us to reach certain empirically based conclusions, strongly suggesting the need to modify present language practices. Specifically, several studies have been done demonstrating the ways in which generic constructions bias perceptions and behaviors in favor of men. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to adopt nongeneric linguistic constructions, which may increase the probability of unbiased communication between women and men. Communication educators and researchers can contribute constructively toward this goal by implementing these recommended changes in their own behaviors, thereby, serving as appropriate role models for their students, and by conducting further interesting research in this important area.

Footnotes

¹ See for instance, "Growing up Girlish," Trans/action, (November-December, 1970); Pauline S. Bart, "Why Women See the Future Differently from Men," in Learning for Tomorrow the Role of the Future in Education, ed. Alvin Toffler (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 55; Amitai Etzioni, "The Women's Movement—Tokens Vs. Objectives," Saturday Review, 20 May 1972, pp. 31-35; Wilma Scott Heide, "Feminism: The Sine Qua Non for a Just Society," Vital Speeches, 38 (1972), 403; Myra Sadker, "Are You Guilty of Teaching Sex Bias?" Instructor, 82 (August/September, 1972), 81; Teresa E. Lévitin, Robert P. Quinn, and Graham L. Staines, "A Woman is 58% of a Man," Psychology Today, 7 (March, 1973), 89-91; Judith Davis, "Do Men Need Women's Liberation?" Psychiatry, 37 (November, 1974), 387-400; Warren Farrell, The Liberated Man: Freeing Men and Their Relationships With Women (New York: Random House, 1974); Agate Nesaule Krouse and Barbara Taylor Desmarais, "Why Discuss Men in Sexist Society," Women's Studies Newsleter, 2 (Fall-Winter, 1975), 12-13; Tony Schwartz, "Women and Men: No More Absolutes," Change, 6 (October, 1974), 24-28; Anne Steinmann and David J. Fox, The Male Dilemma: How to Survive the Sexual Revolution (New York: J. Aronson, 1974); Sandra Lipsitz Bem, "Beyond Androgyny: Some Presumptuous Prescriptions for a Liberated Sexual Identity," paper presented at the APA-NIMH Conference on The Research Needs

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³Jo Sprague, "The Reduction of Sexism in Speech Communication Education," The Speech Teacher, 24 (January, 1975), 37-45.

⁴See for instance, Marjorie B. U'Ren, "The Image of Women in Textbooks," Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness, eds. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), p. 326.

⁵Representative articles include, Julie Coryell, "What's in a Name?" Women: A Journal of Liberation, 2 (1971), 59; Aileen Hernandex, "The Preening of America," Star News, 1 January, 1971; E. Merriam, "Sex and Semantics," in Liberation Now, eds., D. Babcox and M. Belkin (New York: Dell, 1971; Ethel Strainchamps, "Our Sexist Language," in Woman in a Sexist Society, eds., Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971), pp. 240-250; Haig A.

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⁸Joseph W. Schneider and Sally L. Hacker, "Sex Role Imagery and Use of the Generic 'Man' in Introductory Texts: A Case in the Sociology of Sociology," The American Sociologist, 8 (1973), 12-18.

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¹⁵Reginald Stuart, "NOW Getting Organized to Fight for Amendment," New York Times, 25 April, 1977, p. 26-L.

¹⁶For an example of the "s/he" construction in textbook writing see, James C. McCroskey and Lawrence R. Wheelless, Introduction to Human Communication (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1976). For an example of the "his/her" construction in textbook writing see, Robert J. Kibler, Donald J. Cegala, David T. Miles, and Larry L. Barker, Objectives for Instruction and Evaluation (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1974).

¹⁷Albert Mehrabian, Silent Messages (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), p. iv.

¹⁸Ibid, p. iv.